

Access to the Past and the Present: A History of the M. C.
Migel Memorial Collection, American Printing House for the
Blind

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Abstract: The history of the M.C. Migel Memorial collection is summarized. The significance of Robert Irwin, Moses Charles Migel, and Helga Lende in the formation of the Library and the field of visual impairment are discussed. The 2009 transfer of the collection from the American Foundation for the Blind to the American Printing House for the Blind is explained. Work being done to improve accessibility and expand collection development is presented. Feedback from users on the significance of the collection concludes the article.

Introduction

The M.C. Migel Memorial Collection has a rich history of service to the field of visual impairment. Originally conceived of by prominent leaders in the field, the collection was further developed by a uniquely qualified librarian over the course of her 35-year tenure. Although the Collection experienced a brief period of uncertainty, it has been revived into the most far-reaching and accessible stage of its life.

History at the American Foundation for the Blind

Irwin founds the collection

Robert B. Irwin began advocating for a research library on visual impairment in 1926 - four years before his promotion to Executive Director of the American Foundation for the Blind. While serving as Director of Research and Education, he convinced the AFB trustees to devote \$1,000 to library development. Irwin donated his personal collection, other donors followed suit, and the library numbered 800 volumes within two years. Because of the rapid growth of the collection, Irwin hired a librarian named Helga Lende in 1929. Originally from Norway, Lende could read German,

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Spanish, French, English, and her native Scandinavian languages. Her broad linguistic ability was essential to building the diverse library that was to become the M.C. Migel Collection. Interestingly, a 1929 letter from Irwin noted that a prominent figure in the field and the organization had been absent from the meeting to appoint Lende as librarian - Moses Charles Migel (Koestler, 2005).

The philanthropist and his namesake

M.C. Migel was a prosperous silk manufacturer who made a second career out of philanthropy work for people who were visually impaired. He learned of the Uniform Type Committee while volunteering at the New York Home for Blind Men and Women, and offered to serve as the “treasurer” for the Commission. As such, he personally provided the organization’s funding. Immediately following World War One, Migel served as a major in the Red Cross. He took charge of rehabilitation services for American veterans who had been blinded in the War, and created and financed the Red Cross Bureau of Reconstruction and Reeducation in France (Koestler, 2005).

Migel was integral to the formation of the American Foundation of the Blind, and became its first president in 1922. He continued his history of service at the Foundation, where he helped create and oversee the American Foundation for Overseas Blind/Helen Keller International. Migel was an early advocate for individuals who were visually impaired in labor

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and employment, and helped found and preside-over the World Conference on Work for the Blind and The World Blind Union. Migel and Irwin collaborated to promote the Wagner-O'Day legislation, which ensures U.S. Government use of products made by people who are blind. This led to the formation of the National Industries for the Blind in 1938, whose board Migel chaired. Beyond even these achievements, Migel was influential in the formation of the National Library Service for the Blind through the Pratt-Smoot Act of 1931, and in establishing AFB's Talking Book Program in 1933 (Tuttle, 2007).

Helga Lende's historic service

Whether it was because he was not present at her appointment or for another unknown reason, Migel "never quite approved" (Koestler, 2005, p. 549) of the appointment of Helga Lende. But the trustees felt strongly enough to, as Irwin stated, "save Miss Lende's salary from elimination from the budget" (Koestler, 2005, p. 549). Helga served as librarian for 35 years, where she also managed AFB Publications and authored several works. Lende retired in 1964, leaving a collection numbering 25,000 items. Just before her final year, she saw the newly-renovated library named after the person against whom the trustees had once argued to justify the librarian's employment. By 1972, the M.C. Migel Memorial Library employed 3 librarians to manage its 30,000 items (Koestler, 2005).

Transfer to the American Printing House for the Blind

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The Collection circulated until 2009, when AFB had to implement staff reductions and move to smaller quarters due to the stock market collapse. The Foundation decided to move the library to another organization, and American Printing House for the Blind President Tuck Tinsley wanted to bring the library to APH (Hudson, 2015). "We selected APH to house the Migel Library because it is a repository of knowledge and is committed to preserving and expanding its book collection," said AFB president Carl Augusto. "With APH's popular annual meeting and its connection to a number of university prep programs, we are confident these important books will continue to educate people in our field for years to come," ("AFB eNews," 2009). In September of that year, APH paid \$50,000 for the collection, and the stacks were transferred to Louisville, Kentucky (Hudson, 2015).

Renewed life at the American Printing House for the Blind

The Migel's online catalog was up by October of 2010. The scope of the growing Collection includes all non-medical aspects of visual impairment. Fiction, newsletters, proceedings, theses, manuscripts, and correspondence dating back to the 1700s are included, as are audio/visual materials. Especially significant are the thousands of articles that have been harvested from periodicals and individually cataloged and described. As a closed collection, items no longer circulate outside of APH. But the old

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circulation cards pocketed in many books show that previous circulation statistics are dwarfed by the use of the collection's digitized materials.

Digitization

Since 2010, APH has been connecting the past with the present through an ongoing, collaborative digitization project with Internet Archive. High-quality photography produces such clear images that sighted users can view the imperfections of the aging paper without experiencing the brittleness. Because of the work that Internet Archive does to provide formats such as Daisy, EPub, and read-aloud full-text, thousands of digitized items can be accessed for free by users who are visually-impaired. This not only allows the whole world to retrieve these rare items, but also provides the only accessible formats for older materials to print-disabled researchers. Recently, Internet Archive has expanded their Open Library project. Miguel items that are still in-copyright can now be digitized and checked-out through Open Library's "controlled digital lending" program. With a free virtual library card, users can borrow a book in any accessible format for 2 weeks.

In 2014, APH was awarded an \$11,000 grant from the H.W. Wilson foundation to purchase a Table Top Scribe (TTS) from Internet Archive. Just like the model used at their digitization centers, it enables books to be safely placed in a supportive, v-shaped cradle for digitization. This allows for the in-house digitization of items too fragile to be shipped to Internet

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Archive, in addition to the prompt digitization of items that have been requested by remote users of the collection.

The Migel Collection at Internet Archive (<https://archive.org/details/aphmigel>) has become the world's door to the collection. While those old circulation cards may show that books once circulated a handful of times, if at all, digitized materials at Internet Archive often have hundreds or thousands of views each. To date, more than 7,600 items are available at the Migel Library's Internet Archive page, with over 1.4 million views. It has also opened up lines of communication with instructors, advocates, students, and historians from 6 continents. The close relationship that has developed with Internet Archive has been 10 years in the making, with plans to collaborate on pioneering work on their Print Disabled Collection in the future.

Research services at APH

While the digitized collection touches the world, the Migel Library still proves to be a destination for researchers from as far away as France and Nigeria. At least ten publications have been released by authors who have visited the library to use some of the 13,000 items that have not yet been digitized. These publications on braille literacy, early childhood education, history, and attitudes towards visual impairment are now held in the same stacks that were consulted by their authors. There, best preservation practices and conservation projects ensure that the

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condition of these artifacts will be stable, if not improved. Additionally, the valuable research materials available the APH Callahan Museum and Archive provide more in-house research opportunities. Programming and outreach collaborations with the APH Museum, Hall of Fame for the Blindness Field, and even Louisville Slugger Museum have created opportunities to illustrate the roles that people who are visually impaired have played in society, be it through “Beep Baseball” or music.

Blind Musicians collection

It was while researching fiddler Michael Cleveland that the idea was developed to create a collection of works by musicians who are visually impaired. With little published information on the 1999 KSB graduate, it was decided to purchase his albums for the Library.

Research held in the Migel also showed the significant historical role that music has played in the lives of people who are visually impaired. After contacting several prominent organizations, no collection of works by musicians who are blind could be found. In 2015, the H.W. Wilson Foundation awarded APH a grant to create the only known “Blind Musicians Collection.” While the CDs and LPs are housed in the Library, an iPad serves as a listening station in the reading room. There, patrons can listen to 240 works by the 113 artists that are represented in the collection. Additionally, a playlist has been created on Spotify for listeners to access for free anywhere in the world.

Feedback from researchers

As geographically diverse as researchers in the field of visual impairment might be, the close-knit nature of the field has allowed for valuable communication and feedback from researchers using the Migel collection. Users have repeatedly stated that the Migel is either the only source for the items that they need, or the only place that these materials were all housed together. The preservation-of and access-to the collective knowledge of the field seems to be an increasingly pressing concern as many organizations for the blind are forced to decrease what might be considered non-essential services. Through these times, APH will continue to devote itself to the preservation of the information that allows the field to understand itself, and to inform its future.

Conclusion

The M. C. Migel Memorial Collection has a history as rich as the information contained within its pages. The Collection will continue to thrive, be it through expanded digitization projects, collection development, or programming and outreach. And, most importantly, interactions with both visually impaired and sighted researchers from Turkey to Tibet have proven that accessibility to the collection is likely the best that it has ever been. The American Printing House for the Blind and the Migel Library

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look forward to a long future assisting, inspiring, honoring, preserving, and promoting the field of visual impairment.

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